Ruha: The Queen of the World of Darkness in Mandaeism

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Editorial Introduction

The following academic paper offers a profound theological and mythological examination of "Ruha," the central female archetype of the underworld in Mandean cosmogony. By contextualizing Ruha within broader Near Eastern mythologies—particularly through comparative parallels with the Babylonian Tiamat and Gnostic Sophia traditions—the author untangles the complex, multi-layered, and often paradoxical nature of her character. Far from being a monolithic emblem of absolute malice, Ruha emerges as a liminal entity caught in an existential tension between the material confinement of the flesh and the transcendent longing for the Primal Light. Translated here with rigorous academic precision, this study provides invaluable insights into the ethical dualism, Gnostic undercurrents, and structural shifts that define Mandean theology. It is impossible to discuss the realms of Light and Darkness in the Mandean religion without examining, in considerable detail, the character of **Ruha**. She is the spirit of evil, the Queen of the World of Darkness, and the mother of Ur, the commander of the legions of darkness. Furthermore, she is the progenitor of the seven planets and the twelve zodiacal signs (the constellations)1.

Despite the proliferation of malevolent entities within the underworld—each possessing an immense capacity for malice, as evidenced by their descriptive names, such as *Atrufhan* ("he who strikes violently, the harmer"), *Amamit* ("the dim, the obscured"), *Karfiyun* ("the devourer"), *Namrus* ("the rebellious, the crushing, the bruising"), and *Ur* ("the commander of the legions of darkness, the rebel, the dragon")—Ruha remains the principal and central figure of the dark realm. In this regard, she bears a striking resemblance to the character of *Tiamat* in ancient Babylonian religion, who similarly serves as the pivotal axis of the netherworld or chaotic cosmos, despite the multiplicity of other malevolent beings capable of inflicting harm upon earthly creatures and the souls of the deceased alike, as articulated in a Babylonian incantation: Through the high, thick walls, they pour like a flood, They sweep from house to house. No door can restrain them, no latch can turn them back. They glide through the door like slithering serpents, They burst through the lattices like the wind. They tear the wife from her husband’s embrace, They snatch the child from his father’s knees, And wrench the man away from his kindred.2, 3 Yet, simultaneously, through the textual traditions preserved in the *Ginza Rabba* and other sacred Mandean scriptures, we observe that the character of Ruha lacks the stark simplicity and transparent clarity that define Tiamat. Ruha appears to manifest a multifaceted persona; her distinct identities are frequently enigmatic, blurred, and fluid in their boundaries. In other words, while she is undeniably framed as the primary, malicious sovereign of darkness, textual nuances suggest that she may not have occupied this role *ab initio*

(from the beginning). At times, Ruha appears as though she does not natively belong to the World of Darkness, or rather, as if she was cast down into it due to some primordial exigency. Although no explicit, singular theological dogma states this directly, we can deduce this complexity from her composite character within various scriptural contexts scattered throughout the canon. For instance, at the conclusion of the first journey undertaken by the *Uthra* (angelic being) *Hibil Ziwa* into the World of Darkness, he takes Ruha with him to facilitate an encounter with her ancestors, as recorded in the following text: “I took the mirror and fashioned myself in the likeness of her brother, Kaf, and I bidden her to ascend to her fathers. She said: ‘And where are my fathers?’ I replied: ‘In the world that resides above us.’”4

Of which ancestors does this text speak? Furthermore, Ruha's subsequent behavior appears remarkably peculiar; she weeps, laments, and repeatedly imploles Hibil Ziwa: “When shall I reach my parent?”5, 6 This profound awareness of intricate details pertaining to the World of Light is deeply striking. This is further illustrated in a dialogue between Ur and his mother, Ruha, as they discuss Hibil Ziwa: He turned to his mother, inquiring: “What shall I do?” She answered: “O my son, you are darkness, and he is light. If he advances upon you, you shall be shattered; you cannot advance against him, but he shall recede from you.”7 From whence did she derive this *a priori* knowledge? In another text, Ruha expounds upon the absolute power and capacity of Hibil Ziwa, instructing her demons: “This man was never of us, nor shall he ever be; neither were his teachings of your teachings, nor shall they ever be.”8 Once more, from where does this discernment originate? The ambiguity surrounding her persona deepens further when we read the remarkable passage found in the *Butha* (verse) of *"O Judgment and Counterparts"* from the *Sidra d-Nishmata* (The Book of Souls), where Ruha cries out in bitter anguish: “And the Spirit—Ruha—lifted her voice, cried out, and said: ‘My Father, my Father, why hast Thou created me? My God, O my God, why hast Thou removed me, severed me, and abandoned me in the depths of the earth and within the clouds of the lower darkness, while I possess no power to ascend thither?’”9 Does this not poignantly evoke the cry of Jesus upon the cross: *“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”* This stark internal contradiction within her persona—vacillating between an authentic chthonic entity of darkness and an exiled being subtly hinted at by certain scriptures as having been cast down or banished to the underworld at a specific cosmic juncture—remains highly perplexing. How else can we interpret, for example, the proclamation of Ruha when she manifested to *Dnanukht* in a dream, declaring: “I am Life since eternity. I am the *Kushta* (Truth) that existed in the beginning. I am the Radiance and I am the Light. I am the Error, and I am the Correct. I am the Construction, and I am the Ruin. I am the Sickness, and I am the Healing… and I am the primordial, wealthy Being, more ancient than the one who constructed the heavens and the earth.”10 Undeniably, she is attempting to deceive him by masquerading as the Great Life (*Hayyi*), yet the lingering question persists: how does she possess such intimate familiarity with the numerous attributes of the

Divine Life? Scriptural texts frequently characterize Ruha as the cosmic agent responsible for desire, lust, and carnal appetite, positioning her as the absolute antithesis of the *Nishimta* (the divine soul). Consequently, a perpetual struggle ensues between the two, mirroring the macrocosmic warfare between the primordial realms of Light and Darkness. Nonetheless, we occasionally encounter texts wherein Ruha is depicted in a state of profound vulnerability and capitulation, actively seeking her own salvation. This is evident in a passage from the *Diwan Malkutha ʿAlitha*, where she appears as the counterpart or mirror image of the *Nishimta*. Ruha addresses and supplicates the soul, saying: “By your life, by your life, O Soul, take me with you as your companion. If I have wronged you, remember me with benevolence; for I knew you not, nor did I comprehend you. Truly, he who clothes himself in compassion finds that which he seeks.” In another passage from the same Diwan, we read: “The Spirit—Ruha—arises from the depths of the body, and the Soul—Nishimta—which is the soul of Shitel, embraces her, saying to her: ‘Take me with you as your companion.’”11 It is highly plausible that the contradiction inherent in Ruha’s character stems from her structural position as the intermediate zone between the *Nishimta* (the Soul belonging to the Realm of Light) and the physical body (matter belonging to the Realm of Darkness). She fluctuates between these two poles: either drawing closer to the *Nishimta* to attain the anticipated salvation, or sinking deeply into the temptations, lusts, and transgressions reified by the material body. Only through this lens can we comprehend, perhaps, the reason behind the Uthra Hibil Ziwa’s decision to escort her to the liminal boundary separating Light and Darkness—a space proximate to the Realm of Light yet structurally contained within the World of Darkness—and leaving her there alone. This act serves as a symbolic allegory for the volatile and hesitant disposition of the human spirit (*ruha*), caught between the fellowship of virtue and the path of righteousness (represented by the *Nishimta*) and the path of perdition and sin (represented by the body, its carnal pleasures, and the material allurements of the earth). This is reinforced by the fact that Ruha is occasionally allegorized as the Earth or the Mother goddess herself: “Let us drink of the Living Water; we have been liberated from the terrifying darkness. Woe unto those who loved thee, O Ruha, and did not sever themselves from thy company! Woe unto those who loved gold and silver, and did not ascend from the earth, nor emerge from within their mother!”12 Another text from the *Diwan Malkutha ʿAlitha* states: “And they said unto them: ‘Who brought you into being, and within whose lap were you nurtured?’ They replied: ‘We were nurtured in the lap of Ruha; yet our Father, indeed our Father has fashioned us—He whose name is the Pure Ether.’ And they declared: ‘We have detested this world, the children of this house, and the house of the Mother.’”13 The material body is understood to have emerged from her womb. Consequently, upon human death, the physical body returns once more to the womb of its mother—to the earth, to Ruha. The human grave thus functions as the somatic womb to which the body returns after the *Nishimta* has departed from it. Ruha’s lack of knowledge, her disorientation regarding how to enter the Realm of Light, and her inability to locate its gates during her journey with Hibil Ziwa are vividly

illustrated in the following exchange between her and Ur: He said: “Where are your fathers?” She replied: “Arise, let us go unto them.” He said: “Then show me the gates.” She said: “I searched for them before your birth, yet I found them not.” Ur thundered and raged, accusing his mother of falsehood, saying: “Is there a world without gates? And are there fathers who lock the gates against their own? Or is it that you enter and know not how to exit? Or are you uttering lies?”14 This dialogue masterfully encapsulates the existential anxiety of the human being, torn between the path of transcendent liberation from the mundane world to ascend to its luminous origin, and the path of absolute immersion within the material cosmos, drawing ever closer to the abyss of darkness. A final, extraordinary observation within this context is that while we are thoroughly accustomed to the rigid dualistic paradigm governing Mandean thought—Light vs. Darkness, Right vs. Left, Good vs. Evil, Soul vs. Body—the theological equation abruptly shifts here into a **tripartite schema: Soul (Nishimta), Spirit (Ruha), and Body (Gushma)**. This tripartite anthropological and theological framework represents a striking anomaly, breaking away from the standard binary structures that typically dominate Mandean theology, liturgy, and cosmology.

Footnotes & References

1. *Ginza Rabba (Left)*: Book III, p. 51.

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2. Dr. Khaz'al Al-Majidi, in defining the etymological origin of the name Ruha, posits: “As for the name Ruha, we believe it is derived from the word *Ahwar* (the marshes), which denotes the vast bodies of water spread across southern Mesopotamia. If we soften the letter 'H' and transition it to an 'A', it transforms into *Ur*, the great serpent of darkness and the son of Ruha. Conversely, if read backward, it yields *Ruh*, a phonetic equivalent to *Ruha*. We advance this view because the marshland environment constituted a dark, enigmatic, and alien world for its inhabitants—a domain of stagnant, black waters populated by strange, mysterious creatures.” See: Khaz'al Al-Majidi, *Mandean Mythology*, p. 226.
3. Abdul-Majid Al-Sadoun, *Mandean Proper Names in the Ginza Rabba* (Master's thesis), pp. 64-105.
4. This closely parallels the phraseology found in a Mandean incantation bowl text: “...and you go unto them—the people—with your incantations and your followers... you smash houses, destroy temples, devour sons like kids, and slaughter daughters like sheep...” See: Ferial Zahrun, *Mandean Incantation Bowls in the Iraqi Museum* (Master's thesis), p. 7.
5. Na'il Hannon, *Beliefs of the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Civilization*, pp. 214-217.
6. *Ginza Rabba (Right)*: Book V, p. 101.
7. E.S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*, pp. 46-54.

8. *Ginza Rabba (Right)*: Book III, p. 108.
9. *Ginza Rabba (Right)*: Book XIII, p. 204.
10. Jorunn Buckley notes that Ruha strongly resembles a "fallen wisdom" figure, drawing direct parallels with the character of Sophia (Wisdom) in Gnostic traditions. See: Jorunn Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People*, p. 40.
11. *Ginza Rabba (Right)*: Book VIII, p. 156.
12. E.S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*, pp. 46-54.
13. Ibid., pp. 46-54.
14. Ibid., pp. 46-54.
15. *Ginza Rabba (Right)*: Book V, p. 106.